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The Troubled Deathbeds of Henry I's Servants: Death, Confession, and Secular Conduct in the Twelfth Century*

David Crouch

When Sir Richard Southern wanted to illustrate the moral compromise that was the inevitable cost of being a courtier and servant of King Henry I of England—the culture of whose court encouraged profiteering and sharp practice—he found the material to hand in a number of surviving letters of the unfortunate Nigel d'Aubigny. At some time between 1109 and 1114 Nigel fell ill, and he believed himself dying. He dictated to his royal master a letter—on which one can almost see the spots of the tears—begging him to confirm the restorations of land that he wanted now to make to various churches he had formerly deprived. Another letter was to his brother, listing further—rather weighty—restorations he wanted made to numerous laymen likewise defrauded by him in the course of his career. Perhaps he felt rather silly when he got better, as he did, and lived for many years more to meditate on his unworthiness.

Sir Richard proved his point, but it occurs to me that the same evidence can be used to explore further a different but related issue: how it was that these men who lived and worked in Henry's service were so very conscious of the moral compromises they had made. If Nigel d'Aubigny was brought to the state that his letters reveal that he was, when he was threatened by death, it can only be because he had been aware of actions that might be considered his sins for

^{*}A version of this paper was read at the Eighteenth International Conference of the Charles Homer Haskins Society, Cornell University, Ithaca NY, on 14 November 1999. I must thank for their insights several contributors to the debate, notably Professors Robin Fleming, Lois Honeycutt, and Paul Hyams. Professors Judith Green and Edmund King and the Rev'd. Dr. Peter Jupp were kind enough to look over the manuscript at a later stage of the process, and offer helpful comments. I would particularly like to acknowledge the help received from a useful and generous critique offered by one of the anonymous readers. It naturally follows that the guilt for such errors as are left will burden my soul and mine alone.

¹R. W. Southern, "Henry I," in *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (Oxford, 1970), 220–21. For the correspondence see *Charters of the Honour of Mowbray, 1107–1191*, ed. D. E. Greenway (British Academy, Records of Social and Economic History, ns, no. 1, 1972), nos. 2–10. The earlier history of the written deathbed notification of restitution is obscure, but there are precursors to the d'Aubigny correspondence. The Maurists noted two: one that came from the deathbed of Hubert, bishop of Angers (c. 1047), who was attended and confessed by his kinsman, Wulgrin, bishop of Le Mans; the other from that of Adhemar, vicomte of Toulouse (c. 1070) who mentions that he has made confession, but does not say to whom (*Thesaurus Novus Anecdotorum*, ed. E. Martene and U. Durand, 5 vols. [Paris, 1717] 1: cols. 141–42, 200–01).

quite some while. The clerics around his bed were thus able to bring home to him the ultimate consequence of sin and move him to make restitution where he could. The purpose of this paper is therefore to talk about conscience and penitence at the time of Henry I of England in the dim light of the death chambers of those who served him, and offer some broad concluding observations about lay life at that period, which is generally regarded as one of cultural and intellectual change.

The d'Aubigny correspondence is by no means a unique survival from the reign. Similar letters survive from the last days of Bishop Richard de Beaumais of London, Henry's justiciar on the March who died in 1127; from the deathbed of Count Robert of Meulan, the king's great friend, in 1118; of Geoffrey de Clinton around 1133; and a whole dossier survives concerning the life and death of Gilbert, his sheriff of Surrey, in 1125. We might also note the evidence of the deathbeds of those of his servants who died after Henry, particularly that of Bishop Roger of Salisbury in 1139. There are also accounts of royal deathbeds that are relevant, the king's mother-in-law, Margaret of Scotland, his wife, Mathilda, and of course his own. My suggestion is not so much that from them we ought acquire a view that Henry's court was a sink of sin, which drove its inhabitants to frantic efforts to secure salvation at the last (which was not Southern's point either); rather, it is that we can derive from them some useful—and rather less histrionic—reflection on the place of penance in noble and lay culture in the first quarter of the twelfth century: a time that long precedes the evidence that councils, handbooks, and episcopal synodalia can give on lay confession and penitence. And from that reflection comes some useful insight into how lay aristocrats of that time viewed conduct that was both praiseworthy and commendable.

Before Lateran IV, and before the Liber poenitentialis of Alan de Lille (the earliest known confessor's manual, written around 1200), the nature and frequency of lay confession is an open question for most of Europe. We can be fairly confident that already by the twelfth century the lay folk of at least England and France were given an opportunity to confess and receive penance at least once a year, on Maundy Thursday (a practice described below). To this extent, the twenty-first canon (Omnis utriusque sexus) of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) was clearly building on established practice. But we cannot say with any certainty much more about confession that would apply across western Europe, particularly if we are looking for evidence of auricular, private confession to a priest. It has long been clear to writers on the subject that early confessional practice—and the subsequent penance—was neither standardized nor the subject of a common understanding amongst early medieval people.² Caro-

²The relevant canon runs: "Every Christian of either sex, after attaining years of discretion, shall faithfully confess all his sins to his own priest at least once a year, and shall endeavour according to his ability to fulfill the penance enjoined him, reverently receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist at least at Easter...," translated in Medieval Handbooks of Penance: a translation of the principal

lingian bishops had looked with disfavor on the practice of private confession to a priest, which had infiltrated the Frankish church from the direction of Ireland. They did not like the penitential tariffs that followed on confession; they could be eccentric and might be "redeemed" by cash payment. Bishops preferred, it seems, that confession and penance for public and notorious sins be public. In this way, the process was subject to their control. But people in general may have disagreed with them, thinking that such exposure might be best left to the confession that was part of the deathbed ritual of separation. At the same time, bishops did not add to the regularity of penitential practices when they chose to issue at particular feasts or solemnities absolution of sins and remissions of penance to the people gathered to witness it, as Bishop Gundulf of Rochester did in 1091 at Canterbury, at the translation of the body of St Augustine. What part confession played in such "indulgences" as they came to be called, is not easy to discover, and in the Canterbury case, it might not necessarily have been any more than liturgical confession during mass.

Alexander Murray finds a shift in attitudes to confession after 1000, with the whole process of confession, imposition of penance, and absolution being compounded into the one session, supervised by a counseling priest. But how much did the laity avail itself of the opportunity? Before 1100 monastic and clerical confession is relatively well-attested, as is the corporal punishment administered to the penitent. But apart from deathbed, canonical confession we know very little indeed about the laity. However, after 1100, things begin to clear and Murray discerns something definitely afoot in the discipline of confession in the early twelfth century. Murray sees some stirring of new things in confessional discipline at the school of Laon under its great master, Anselm, who, with his brother Ralph, made the place a center of Biblical and dialectical study between 1090 and 1120. Little of Anselm's teaching survives: he was a prin-

libri poenitentiales and selections from related documents, ed. J. T. McNeill and H. M. Gamer (New York, 1938), 413. For some recent and judicious comment about the limits of our knowledge, see, A. Murray, "Confession before 1215," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 6th ser., 3 (1993): 63–65, 79–80; M. McLaughlin, Consorting with Saints: prayer for the dead in early medieval France (Ithaca, NY, 1994), pp. 219–27; P. Biller, "Confession in the Middle Ages: Introduction," in Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages, ed. P. Biller and A. J. Minnis (York Studies in Medieval Theology, 2, 1998), pp. 7–9. For earlier studies exploring the same uncertain ground, P. Anciaux, The Sacrament of Penance (London, 1962), esp. 63–73, 166–81; C. Vogel, Le pécheur et la pénitence au moyen àge (Paris, 1969); M. Dudley, "The Sacrament of Penance in Catholic Teaching and Practice," in Confession and Absolution, ed. M. Dudley and G. Rowell (London, 1990), pp. 56–65.

³For the Canterbury indulgence, Goscelin of Canterbury, *Historia translationis sancti Augustini episcopi*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J-P. Migne et al., 221 vols. (Paris, 1844–64) 155: col. 19.

⁴Gilbert Crispin, abbot of Westminster (c. 1085–1117), writes verses on confession, which dwell on the flogging that scourged the guilt from the sinner (*The Works of Gilbert Crispin, abbot of Westminster*, ed. A. S. Abulafia and G. R. Evans [Auctores Britannici medii aevi, viii, 1986), pp.180–81).

cipally a debater and lecturer, but into the intellectual turmoil of Laon in 1113, came Peter Abelard, determined to encounter and demolish Anselm and so establish himself as the greatest logician in the West. Abelard had already debated and dueled for years in Paris with William de Champeaux, Anselm's greatest pupil, and so it can be no accident that one of the earliest themes in his writing is the utility of confession of sin and penance, which is no surprise because one of the chief themes of Anselm and William's teachings that have come down to us is the nature of sin and the motivation to commit sin. Abelard got into trouble through his willingness in debate to entertain the idea that confession and penance were superfluous, once sin had been acknowledged and repented before God.⁶ Laon and Paris show that Northern Europe's finest minds were revolving the linked concepts of sin, penitence, and the utility of confession before and during the reign of Henry I of England, and, as Murray points out, many Laon alumni were holding high ecclesiastical office in his kingdom as early as the first decade of his reign.

However, it would not do to see the school of Laon and its students as originators of a new discipline of regular lay confession before a priest; they were its apologists and promoters. For Northern France there is, for instance, the evocative evidence of Guibert de Nogent's autobiography, that described his pious mother in the 1090s undergoing "almost" daily confession, at a time before Laon could have had any influence on the laity. We will see evidence below that the practice of regular lay confession in England also well precedes any influence Laon could have exerted, other than the influence of making it exciting and fashionable. Murray notes that when the canons of Laon traveled to England with their relics of the Virgin on a money-raising tour in 1114, the chronicler of the mission insists that those who wished to use the water that had flowed over the relics had first to make confession to a priest. The canons did this at Canterbury where a sick woman was advised to make a sincere confession to her priest, which she did. The priest certified to the canons that she had made her confession and undertaken future amendment, and she was allowed access to the relics. Hermann of Laon insists that "no one was cured unless first they had confessed their sins to their priest, providing that they were of age to do so; if they were small children, their parents were advised to make confession in place of the child."8 While this Laon source is not in itself evidence of regular

⁵Murray, "Confession before 1215," pp. 77-78.

⁶For Anselm, William of Champeaux, Abelard, and their interlinked teaching, see M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 67–85.

⁷De Vita Sua, translated as Self and Society in Medieval France, ed. and trans. J. F. Benton (Toronto, 1984), p. 75.

⁸Hermann of Laon, *De miraculis sanctae Mariae Laudunensis*, in *Patrologia Latina*, 156: cols. 977, 978. Confession to a priest was enjoined severally at Winchester on a royal butler and a

lay confession in England, it is good evidence that in 1114 priests were available and ready across the province of Canterbury to offer the sacrament of confession and reconciliation to their parishioners, when asked.

The military aristocracy in the early twelfth century shows signs of highly valuing the sacrament of penance. Naturally, they were most anxious at the point of death, and before battle. Even the most hardened warriors in twelfthcentury western Europe were desperate to confess at the end, and one account of William Rufus's violent death in the New Forest in 1100 has him in a delirium of pain begging the last rites from a huntsman he imagined was a priest and receiving substitute viaticum in the guise of herbs. What is less easy to assess is whether confession to a priest played a part in their normal spiritual lives. But there are some indications that some among the aristocracy aspired to private and regular confession. Although it is not possible to quantify lay devotion at that time—is it possible to do so at any time?—we can at least find some ideas of normal expectations from particular sources. "Normal expectations" means clerical expectations at this time; clerical writers, such as Wace, naturally depicted their heroes as men of unusual piety. William of Malmesbury was a writer who lived through the reign of Henry I. In the mid 1120s he reflected on reasons why the pre-Conquest English nobility earned the disfavour of God. One reason was that the English failed in their Christian duty of morning at-

usurer; at Exeter on a crippled beggar and an arthritic; and at Barnstaple on a crippled twelve-year old girl (ibid., cols. 978, 979, 982).

⁹Geoffrey Gaimar, in the late 1130s, gives a highly-colored account of the death of King William Rufus, the mortally wounded king in his agony gasped out three times his demand for the corpus domini, and since the king was in a delirium a huntsman pressed on him some flowering herbs to eat in the guise of a priest administering viaticum, see L'Estoire des Engleis, ed. A. Bell (Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1960), 2: Il. 6329-40. Some indication of this widespread need among warriors to confess appears in the chansons de geste, for instance this passage in Raoul concerning an impending battle, that probably derives from the third quarter of the twelfth century: "From either side the troops advanced. Each noble man was deeply moved; all promised God that if he survived that day he would sin never again his whole life, or should he do so, he would do penance. Many a knight gave himself communion with three blades of grass-for there were no priests in the army-and commended his soul and body to Jesus." Raoul de Cambrai, ed. W. Kibler and S. Kay (Paris, 1996) ll. 2244-51 (my translation). The threefold nature of the substitute sacrament doubtless derives from the practice of breaking the host into three at the point of fraction in the mass, see Lancelot do Lac, ed. E. Kennedy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1980) 1:332, ll. 4-5, for the twelfthcentury theology of the three-fold fraction, see M. Rubin, Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture (Cambridge, 1991), 38-39. This threefold division was given a teaching significance for the benefit of the laity. The romance Garin (from a similar time and place as Raoul) interprets the three blades as the "iii. vertuz del ciel" (viz. the "theological virtues" of faith, hope and love) and in extremis as an acceptable and conscious substitute for the corpus domini, Garin le Loherenc, ed. A. Iker-Gittleman, 3 vols. (Classiques français du moyen àge, 1996-97) II.10001-04. The Prose Lancelot, some decades later, interprets the three blades in a Trinitarian sense, Lancelot do Lac, 1:14, ll.11-13. A telling twelfth-century curse against an enemy was to wish him a sudden death (so that he died unconfessed), see Ami et Amile, ed. P. F. Dembowski

tendance in church, at best loafing around in their chambers while a household chaplain gabbled through the morning office and mass more or less unheeded. From this, he seems to have believed that society's leaders ought normally to show up in church for at least their morning devotions. The best of them, like William the Conqueror—whom he holds up for particular praise—would attend daily at mattins, the mass and vespers. The very best, like Margaret of Scotland, would live by a rule, keeping vigil, attending the full office in her chapel, and joining in the recitation of the psalter. ¹⁰

That this (admittedly clerical) expectation of lay devotion included practices of confession and penitence is likely. The legatine council at Westminster in 1125 listed the offices of the church for which no payment should be asked, and one of them is *pro penitentia*. This indicates at the very least that the Church in England in the middle of Henry I's reign wished to encourage a penitential culture amongst its laity, and in any such regime, confession must play its part. We find evidence of just such a culture amongst even the less exalted lay folk. The *Vita* of William of Norwich gives a glimpse of just such a world, and although it deals with Norwich diocese in the mid 1140s, the conditions it describes often reflect on the previous decade, when Henry was king. The boy William was murdered on Maundy Thursday, described as being "the day of absolution, on which the penitents of the whole diocese were accustomed to assemble at the mother church of Norwich," and the streets of the city were thronged. That some of these penitents had undergone a one-to-one

(Classiques français du moyen àge, 1987), 1: l. 324, where the author curses the traitor Hardrez: "Dex li envoit la male mort soubite!."

¹⁰William of Malmesbury, Gesta Regum Anglorum, ed. R. A. B. Mynors, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1999) 1: 458, 492, 554. Other early twelfth-century writers give a similar expectation of their better characters. The accounts of the death of Count Charles of Flanders highlight his piety, his practice of regular alms-giving and his joining in the psalmody of the daily office; he was killed as his chaplains were saying the morning office, see the account in Galbert of Bruges, The Murder of Charles the Good, ed. and trans. J. B. Ross (Toronto, 1982), pp. 89, 112. Master Wace, around 1160, depicts the young Richard I of Normandy as attending daily prayer and the morning mass, Le Roman de Rou, ed. A. J. Holden, 3 vols. (Société des anciens textes français, 1970–73) 1: pt. 2, Il. 3088–89, 3190–92. Wace also, incidentally, has the same low opinion of the piety of the pre-Conquest English aristocracy, that he portrays drinking and singing the night away before Hastings, disturbing the neighboring Normans, who were spending all night at their prayers and confession (ibid., 2: pt. 3, Il. 7323–80.

¹¹This canon either reflects long established practice or a penitential impulse from quite a different direction, the papal curia, see *Councils & Synods with other Documents relating to the English Church i, pt 2, 1066–1204*, ed. D. Whitelock, et al. (Oxford, 1981), p. 738, c. 2.

12 For the "Day of Absolution" as practiced in France as well as England in the twelfth century, when penitents would make confession before presenting their offerings at the chief church, see J. Avril, "Remarques sur un aspect de la vie religieuse paroissiale: La pratique de la confession et de la communion du xe au xive siècle," in, L'encadrement religieux des fidèles au moyen àge et jusqu'au Concile de Trente (Actes du 109e Congrès National des Sociétés Savantes, Paris, 1985),

rite of confession is clear from the text's reference to a senior priest of the cathedral monastic community holding the bishop's licence to hear confession and administer penance in his place.¹³ The physical nature of the penance demanded in such sessions is occasionally illustrated from the same *vita*. Characters appear who voluntarily endure iron shackles, including one from whom the shackles unaccountably broke and fell when he handled the new-born William (which would have been in February 1132).¹⁴

Why had Anglo-Norman England developed such a robust ideal of lay piety? The tradition of King Henry's wife's family may give one clue. Queen Margaret of Scotland, before her death in 1095, was clearly used to confessing regularly to the senior cleric who later wrote her vita. She can only have derived this discipline from a pre-Conquest English tradition of lay confession. 15 Her daughter, Queen Mathilda, followed her mother in studious piety. She and her clerical household said together the divine office daily at the appointed hours, "so that you would have thought her chapel to be an enthusiastic convent of professed monks rather than a college of household clerks," as one contemporary writer said. 16 It was this queen who sponsored the foundation of the Augustinian house of Holy Trinity, Aldgate in 1107, and its first prior, Norman, is described by the chronicler of his house as her pater confessionum, saying that "she entrusted herself entirely to his advice on how she should conduct herself in matters spiritual, knowing that he was in all ways a servant of Christ." The Aldgate chronicle attributes to his regime her particular devotion to the relief of the poor, that is also attested in other sources. 17

pp. 349–53. Stephen de Fougères, chaplain of Henry II, and later bishop of Rennes (1168–78), describes the model burgess as one who honors his parish priest and makes his confession to him in Lent, when he pays his tithe (*Le Livre des Manières*, ed. R. A. Lodge 2 vols. (Geneva, 1979), 2: 881–84.

¹³Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich*, ed. A. Jessopp and M. R. James (Cambridge, 1896), pp. 26, 30, 84. Wichemann the monk is called one to who *in consulendis penitentibus suas episcopus uices commiterat*, and *episcopalium confessionum tunc uicarius*, ibid., pp. 30, 84. The episcopal prerogative to administer penance is perhaps reflected in Wace's account (c. 1170) of the night before Hastings, when the bishops of Coutances and Bayeux administered absolution to the Norman soldiers after their confessions (*Le Roman de Rou*, ed., Holden, 2:pt 3, Il. 7349–54. In his scholastic examination of confession (which is generally uninformative on contemporary practice), Peter Abelard refers to the *sacerdos* or *prelatus* as the cleric to whom the sacrament is committed, both words with episcopal connotations in the late 1130s, and later he talks of it being the power of the *episcopus* to bind and loose, *Peter Abelard's Ethics*, ed. and trans. D. E. Luscombe (Oxford, 1971), pp. 98, 116–18.

¹⁴Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich, pp. 2-13.

¹⁵Aelfric, abbot of Eynsham, in the early eleventh century assumes that penitents will confess and seek absolution and do penance under the guidance of a holy man (*Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, trans. B. Thorpe, 2 vols. (London, 1844) 1: 165; 2: 603.

¹⁶Liber monasterii de Hyda, ed. E. Edwards (Rolls Series, 1866), p. 312.

¹⁷The Cartulary of Holy Trinity Aldgate, ed. G. A. J. Hodgett (London Record Society, 7, 1971), p. 230. Norman is the only clerk explicitly named as the queen's confessor. We know of several

The brief Aldgate chronicle is a key document in attempting to assess the fashionability of a confessional regime among the Anglo-Norman nobility. In its present form it is a fifteenth-century compilation, but much of it derives from a foundation historia of a canon writing late in the reign of Henry II, with access to the memory of his house and to even earlier written sources. Its interest in the confessional activities of the priors therefore reflects an established tradition of this leading Augustinian house. What we know of Prior Norman's origins partly explains this. He had been a student of the school of Laon. 18 Nor was Norman the only prominent alumnus of Laon in England in his day. Archbishop William de Corbeil, Adelard of Bath, Abbot Hugh of Reading, and the episcopal nephews of Bishop Roger of Salisbury, all attended the same school. So what we see with Queen Mathilda and her confessor is a convergence of long-standing family piety with the leading pastoral thinking of the day. In the court of England in the first decades of the twelfth century, regular confession under Augustinian guidance was widespread. And it is no surprise to find that King Henry himself had a penitential association with the Augustinian prior of Nostell, Aethelwulf, described in the 1140s by Robert de Torigny, in the notice of his promotion to Carlisle in 1133, as "the man to whom he was accustomed to confess his sins."19

This was the spiritual environment that produced the troubled deathbeds that are such a feature of Henry's reign. I suggest that, rather than see them as examples of the continuing importance of deathbed confession and restitution in the liturgy of separation, it would be more accurate to see them as the consequence of a curial aristocratic culture that attempted in its lifestyle to reconcile ruthless pragmatism in the affairs of the world with a deep sensibility of individual sin. This can be seen most clearly in Merton priory's close-to-contemporary account of the life and end of its founder, Sheriff Gilbert, in 1125. Gilbert was sheriff of Surrey, Cambridge, and Huntingdon from the early years of King Henry, and was one of his new men.²⁰ We are told that he began his career as

other of her clerical intimates. Bernard, her chancellor, who became bishop of St. David's is unlikely to have been her household confessor, as he did not take priest's orders until the day of his consecration as bishop (18 September 1115), see St David's Episcopal Acta, 1085–1280, ed. J. Barrow (South Wales Record Soc., no. 13, 1998), pp. 2–3. Ernisius, who ultimately became first prior of Llanthony is merely described as notassimus among her household chaplains, Historia Fundationis, in William Dugdale, Monasticon Anglicanum, ed. J. Caley, et al., 6 vols. in 8 (London, 1846) 6:pt. 1, 128. Bishop Gundulf of Rochester is credited in his vita as having a pastoral link with the queen, viz. "she frequently summoned him to her, and was eager to indulge in his improving conversation" but the passage does not indicate he heard her confession, only that she found him a helpful counselor (Vita Gundulfi, in Patrologia Latina, 159: col. 830. I thank Professor Lois Honeycutt for her advice and assistance in this matter.

¹⁸Murray, "Confession before 1215," pp. 75-79.

¹⁹Robert de Torigny, Chronica, in Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard, ed. R. Howlett, 4 vols. (Rolls Series, 1884–89), 4:123.

²⁰J. A. Green, English Sheriffs to 1154 (PRO Handbooks, no, 24, London, 1990), pp. 29, 48, 78.

a stipendiary knight, and he might perhaps have been one of Henry's military household before his succession; he is referred to as a Norman of good birth. He was a particular friend of Queen Mathilda, who treated him like a son after the death of his own mother, and therefore his patronage of Augustinian canons is not surprising, nor are the penitential austerities of his life. Like the queen his mistress, he devoted much money to the support of the poor, dining thirteen of them at a dole table and maintaining three corrodies. He was assiduous in church attendance, Sundays and weekdays. It is no surprise to find from the letter of the canon, Gervase, written on Gilbert's death as an essay in composition, that it had long been his practice "when in health and prosperity" to confess his sins. As a consequence he wore about his waist, next to his skin, a heavy iron chain as a perpetual penance for over two years before his death.²¹

Although Merton priory is concerned to exalt the nobility and piety of its founder, there is too much in its canon's account of Sheriff Gilbert that echoes what we otherwise know of court culture in the reign of Henry I for its excesses to invalidate it. Gilbert was not as exceptional a layman as he might appear. We see other evidence of a penitential culture in accidental survivals relating to the household of Gilbert's younger contemporary, Stephen, count of Mortain and Boulogne. At some time between 1129 and 1133, the count was travelling in the company of his brother, Bishop Henry of Winchester, in all likelihood on the road to or from the episcopal palace of Taunton. They stopped en route to marvel at the rustic prophet, Wulfric of Haselbury, and Stephen was startled to be greeted by Wulfric as the king to be. No doubt he was impressed, and so he visited Wulfric again at some time in the aftermath of Lincoln (probably in 1142, while he still had access to southern Wiltshire) to find himself this time being lectured on the right way to rule England. But as well as edifying Stephen, Wulfric also alluded to a certain sin for which he must do penance before he could establish his throne and achieve peace. "And," says John of Ford, "as he heard this the king dissolved into tears and when he had confessed, he presented his cheek to the prophet to be spat on and slapped" (presumably because it was a sin for which physical amend was not possible).²²

As with the Merton sources, it would not do to dismiss this episode as the imaginative excesses of a hagiographer. The Aldgate chronicle tells us that after the death of Queen Mathilda II in 1118, the priory found new court patrons in Count Stephen and his wife Mathilda of Boulogne, whom he married in 1125. Indeed, in 1137 Stephen and his queen already had sufficient love for the place to confide there for burial their two infant children, Mathilda and Baldwin.

²¹M. L. Colker, "Texts concerning Gilbert, founder of Merton priory," *Studia Monastica* 12 (1970): 241–70, esp. 269.

²²John of Ford, Wulfric of Haselbury, ed. M. Bell (Somerset Record Society, 47, 1933), pp. 117–18, translated in *The Cistercian World: Monastic Writings of the Twelfth Century*, ed. P. Matarasso (Harmondsworth, 1993), p. 265.

Their connection was with the sub-prior, Master Ralph of London, and it is unsurprising to find that Ralph is described as the one who "took charge of the confession of the said Queen Mathilda (III) under Archbishop Theobald" (which confirms what the Vita of William of Norwich has to say of the still dominant place of the bishop in licensing confessors). It is said that it was he who advised her to finance the construction of the great Cluniac abbey at Faversham in 1147 as a penance for her sins, and like Norman his predecessor, he turned her mind to alms for the poor. Ralph, then prior, was at her deathbed at Castle Hedingham in Essex in 1152 and administered the last rites. So there is cumulative evidence of an intense penitential regime in Stephen's household, that must date back to the late 1120s. 23 There is one further household connection. The first known clerk named as a confessor to a lay aristocrat was Robert, chaplain and confessor of Euphemia, countess of Oxford, Robert appears in a charter of hers that dates to 1152 or 1153. The charter makes a grant to Colne priory in Essex out of the maritagium that she had received from her former mistress, Queen Mathilda. Euphemia was married to Earl Aubrey of Oxford after his divorce in around 1144. She was likely enough a former pucele, or lady-in-waiting, of the queen, and it is likely also that she brought into her new life at Hedingham the penitential practices she had known before her marriage in the queen's household.²⁴

Between Alexander Murray's analysis and what we can deduce about court culture from other sources, there seems to be sufficient direct evidence to confirm that lay penitential practices were not only general in England in Henry I's reign at every level of society, they were very fashionable in the highest circles. Of course, what was being confessed is something at which we can usually only guess. However, the deathbed confessions can give some clue. Part of what Nigel d'Aubigny was concerned about was that both in the king's service and about his own business "having sinned much, I did little or nothing that was good"; what he had done was contrive to dispossess seven houses of religion of lands and rents, and to disinherit eleven laymen.²⁵ No doubt there were other weightier deeds burdening his conscience, as he implies, but we only hear of the sins for which he could make restitution in kind. There are other examples. When Count Robert of Meulan was dying in 1118, he was confronted by his confessors—one of whom was Archbishop Ralph of Canterbury—with the demand that he make restitution of the lands he confessed he had abstracted or withheld from various churches. One source says he did so, another, Henry of Huntingdon, tells us that he did not-leaving it to his sons to have masses

²³Cartulary of Holy Trinity Aldgate, p. 232.

²⁴Cartularium prioratus de Colne, ed. J. L. Fisher (Essex Archaeological Society, Occasional Publications, no. 1, 1946), p. 30, ...Roberto capellano confessore meo. The charter dates to a time immediately after the death of Queen Mathilda, and makes a grant for her soul.

²⁵Charters of the Honour of Mowbray, nos. 2, 3.

said to intercede for his tainted soul.²⁶ The deathbed of Bishop Richard de Beaumeis of London in January 1127 was similarly fraught, and his confessors (a chaplain and the dean of St. Paul's) communicated by letter to the archbishop of Canterbury, that he had confessed to them that he had pretended to hold the manor of Betton in Shropshire in fee, in order to give it to his nephew, when in fact he held it on annual lease.²⁷ On his death around 1133 Geoffrey de Clinton, King Henry's treasurer and Sir Richard Southern's representative bureaucrat of the reign, urged his adolescent son in person—and dispatched writs to his steward—to restore lands held in pledge for loans.²⁸

The prime offender among all of Henry I's ministers would necessarily have been his chief justiciar, Bishop Roger of Salisbury, who survived his master by just under four years. So, it is no surprise to find that he spent his final months in the autumn of 1139 in much the same way as his former colleagues: trying to put his account with the Almighty in balance. Several documents survive that record his attempts to make amends for some of the arbitrary and selfish acts he had perpetrated in his long career. The most evocative is one where he confesses to the despoliation of Worcester cathedral priory of the wealthy minster church of Wolverhampton. Roger is conscious of why he had sinned: it was through presumption (*ambitio*) and worldly calculation (*secularis potentia*). Other vivid hints of the deathbed confessional regime he was undergoing were the bishop's appeal to Mary, the Mother of God, for intercession, and his earnest supplication to the monks of Worcester for their pardon and absolution for his venial crime.²⁹

In articulo mortis, the dying aristocrat and prelate of Henry I's reign had no difficulty finding weighty sins for which to seek absolution by restitution. The ones we can discover relate to property, distortions of justice, cheating on inheritance, and taking land on pledge. There can be no doubt that there were others, relating to the Ten Commandments and the seven mortal sins, that we

²⁶D. Crouch, *The Beaumont Twins: the Roots and Branches of Power in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 3, 216–17.

²⁷The Cartulary of Shrewsbury Abbey, ed. U. Rees, 2 vols. (Aberystwyth, 1985) 1:23–24.

²⁸...reddidi Ermenfrido de Ponte homini meo duas virgatas terre in Meluertona sicut pater meus moriens mihi precepit uiua uoce, et per breuem suum dapifero suo et ministris suis mandauit, quam terram Ermenfridus Anschetillo dapifero inuadiauerat pro .xx. solidis. Cartulary of Kenilworth Priory, British Library., MS Harley 3605, fos. 69v–70r. Repeated receipt of interest payments on loans was the principal sin confessed by the bedridden merchant of Winchester, Walter "Kiburs," to satisfy the concern of the canons of Laon about making available their relics to cure him in 1114, *De miraculis sanctae Mariae Laudunensis*, cols. 974–75.

²⁹For the collected documents see, E. J. Kealey, *Roger of Salisbury: Viceroy of England* (Berkeley, 1972), pp. 262–69; for general observations on the bishop's death, see ibid., pp. 202–06.

will hear nothing of other than by allusion, as for instance when Earl Robert of Leicester, an alumnus of Henry I's palace school, engaged in an earnest correspondence with Gilbert Foliot about the difficulty that riches placed in the way of salvation.³⁰ We might see in this an example of the way the educated twelfth-century laity had picked up the same penitential theme that led the Anglo-Norman secular clerks Henry of Huntingdon and Master Wace, canons respectively of Lincoln and Bayeux, to compose essays on "the contempt of the things of this world."³¹ And this leads on to some material for reflection. If one accepts that Henry I's lay aristocracy was morally introspective and as focused on the sacraments of the church as the fourteenth-century aristocracy was, then one must reassess what is believed about its ethical framework. The words in praise of confession by Guibert de Nogent, contemporary of the people we are considering here, apply also to them: that "If I know beauty, I shall never be frightened by foulness."³²

Under the impulse of a tradition of French scholarship going back to the eighteenth century, historians have tended to see conflict between church and aristocracy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: the church laboring through excommunication and the peace movement to restrain a violent, competitive but superstitious aristocracy from undermining all public order. ³³ It was more complicated than that. Many of the aristocracy by 1100 actually knew better, and did not need to be taught as if it was composed of imbeciles. Its relationship with the church and its pronouncements was not conflictual but consensual: one thinks here of Orderic Vitalis's charming portrayal of the knights of the castle of Maule in the Vexin resorting to the cloister garth of its priory to converse on serious subjects with the monks on warm afternoons, and also the way that Gerold the chaplain of Earl Hugh of Chester enthused his master's military

³⁰The Letters and Charters of Gilbert Foliot, ed. A. Morey and C. N. L. Brooke (Cambridge, 1967), p. 265. The point at issue seems to have been Ps. 76: 5: "the proud are robbed, and they have slept their sleep: and all the men whose hands were mighty have found nothing." This concern with psalmody would indicate that Earl Robert, like Queen Mathilda II, observed the hours of the divine office (he ended his days as an Augustinian canon).

³¹For Henry's essay, *De contemptu mundi* (a product of the mid 1120s), see the edition in *Historia Anglorum*, ed. D. E. Greenway (Oxford, 1996). Wace's essay is in the prologue to the third part of his "Roman de Rou," composed probably in the early 1170s in his old age (Wace had been a clerk in orders before 1135 and claims to have met and talked to Henry I), *Le Roman de Rou*, 1:pt. 3, II.1–190.

³²Self and Society in Medieval France, p. 37.

³³For informative treatments of this question, G. Duby, Les trois ordres: ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme (Paris, 1978), trans. A. Goldhammer, The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined (Chicago, 1980), pp. 134–39; F. S. Paxton, "History, Historians and the Peace of God," in The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France around the year 1000, ed. T. Head and R. Landes (Ithaca NY, 1992), pp. 21–40; D. Barthélemy, L'an mil et la paix de Dieu: La France chrétienne et féodale (Paris, 1999), pp. 43–137.

36 David Crouch

household in matters of religion, and indeed turned three of his knights to the cloister.³⁴ Nigel d'Aubigny—languishing and near death—was so vulnerable to the Church's correction not because he feared its lightnings but because he fully shared its ideals and lived in a society that engaged in the constant dialectic between gospel ideal and worldly weakness that is confession. That he and his fellows failed to find the synthesis of the two—that we call sanctity—is no great condemnation of them. That they at least tried is to their credit.

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³⁴Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, ed. M. Chibnall, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969–80), 3: 182–84, 226–28.